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Wheat Pact

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President Kennedy can be grateful that reporters share his professional interest in the folklore of politics. It provided the only comic relief yesterday evening in a press conference otherwise taken up with sticky, unsatisfactory subjects.

The President began manfully with a carefully prepared, heavily defensive statement approving the sale of American wheat to Russia. He must have had some angry Republican editors and politicians in mind when he drafted those remarks. He invoked many passwords of the free enterprise system. No fewer than three times he referred to "private grain dealers" as if their making a profit sanctified a deal that would have been unclean if the government had done it.

He spoke of the Russians striking a bargain with private American merchants, of the wheat being carried in American ships, and of a large sum of gold and dollars flowing in to ease our balance of payments. One would never have dreamed of the anguished conferences in a half-dozen government agencies during the past two weeks to hear this encomium to private initiative. It was almost inadvertently that Mr. Kennedy acknowledged that our wheat market is so strictly controlled and subsidized that, in fact, the wheat going to the Russians is government-owned and the grain dealers are only intermediaries.

From a certain bleak empirical standpoint, this sale of wheat to the Russians can be defended. And probably the President is right in his unspoken rationale that in the over-all context of the cold war, these few million tons of wheat are marginal and not worth excessive emotion on the part of anyone.

Nevertheless, from the moral standpoint the President was on uneasy ground as he well knew. After all, if it is our policy not to strengthen the Russians by trading freely with them, then there is no reason to make an exception of wheat. The fact that wheat is in surplus is irrelevant, since steel and machine tools are also in surplus in this country. The fact that other countries sell wheat to the Russians does not morally justify our doing so. Other people and other countries do all sorts of things such as practice racial discrimination, but that does not justify our doing so. We are the leaders and bulwarks of the cause of freedom in the world, not Canada, not Argentina. In short, if our position toward the Russians is based on principle, then \$250,000,000 in gold, dollars, or old rubles ought not to make any difference.

Mr. Kennedy dug himself out of wheat only to totter into the mud of South Vietnam. What are those Central Intelligence fellows up to over there? Just why is CIA chief John Richardson being recalled from Saigon? Once again, the President stolidly threw back his shoulders and put a brave face on everything. Reports of CIA divisiveness and misbehavior in South Vietnam, were, he told us, not simply exaggerated but "wholly untrue."

He could not only assure us that the CIA supports a unified

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policy but he could assure us "nailly." The unfortunate Richardson was, we learned, a valuable public servant. The President even parroted the standard CIA line that the agency "does not make policy, it executes policy."

Mr. Kennedy's only concession to everybody else's version of reality was a belated remark that perhaps those working at the lower levels in the CIA and rival agencies had not completely received the word about the wonderful unity that prevails at the top.

Our policy toward the military coups in Honduras and the Dominican Republic was the next greasy spoon the President had to grasp. Asked about the wishy-washy, on the one hand but then on the other hand statement issued by Assistant Secretary of State Edward Martin, the President neatly shifted to an earlier statement by Secretary Rusk.

But Rusk's statement deploring the military coups is not, contrary to the President's description, a policy. Rather, it is a premise upon which a policy of positive action could be constructed. Nor is breaking off diplomatic relations with the new military regimes more than a temporary gesture. Unless strong steps are taken in the interim, non-recognition is inevitably followed, sooner or later, by recognition. Mr. Kennedy's lengthy answer only meant that Martin's statement had not reversed our policy of opposition to Latin American dictatorships, but it gave no hint as to how that policy could be made effective.

Now, what about those price increases in the steel industry? The President played for time, tossing off a self-congratulatory aside about how we have avoided an inflationary spiral and all that sort of thing, and then delivered a perfect Eisenhower-type answer — this is something "we're watching with concern."

Can you wonder that it was a wonderful relief for Mr. Kennedy and for the reporters, too, since they are not sadists, to make witticisms about Barry Goldwater and gossip about politics?